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ABSTRACT

The developmental program at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) has a stable core of teachers who value independence rather than conformity and who seek to transform deeply anxious students into students who love learning. The instructors' goals of improving basic skills, fostering independent thinking, and promoting greater knowledge and understanding of the world in each class are integrated into the content and format of the courses. Basic skills are developed through context-embedded practice, text-based exercises, cognitively demanding exercises, and interesting and motivating content. Exercises and units have been created which integrate the processes of thinking, reading, and writing; which teach standard English usage through the study of the history of the English language; and which use drama and film to explore language attitudes. Other course goals revolve around experiential learning, involving students in acting out scenes from plays, attending professional theatrical performances, visiting museums, and reading aloud to children. These experiences are tied to the development of reading and writing skills, and at the same time are part of the intensive exploration of a theme. The three themes covered most extensively since 1984 have been Afro-American heritage, classics in Western European culture, and the diversity within Third World cultures. Classroom discussions become educational experiences valuable in themselves, but also as preparation for future learning. (LAL)

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CULTURAL IMMERSION AND DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

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Cultural Immersion and Developmental Education

At Community College of Philadelphia the English teachers in the developmental programs have some goals that are frequently aired and shared in department meetings, readjusted and monitored. These goals form a familiar litany: main ideas (either identified, or formulated), supporting details (to be distinguished from main ideas or written in distinguished ways), and such miscellanea as complete sentences and the final "s" used as it was in sixteenth century England. These literacy goals form entrance and exit criteria for a year and a half of developmental writing and reading courses, for we have discovered that no matter how directly we tackle these skills, students need to read and write a lot before they grow. We have also discovered that literacy skills, by themselves, encourage a narrow conformity.

Our main developmental program, however, has a stable core of teachers who value independence rather than conformity and who have begun to recognize a broad range of goals that sustain their desire to teach. These goals seek the transformation of our students, from students whose past educational experience has made them deeply anxious--they come to us reeling from the results of their placement exams, often resentful, often trying on a mask of indifference, but primarily anxious--to students who love learning. When I was considering the title for this paper "Immersion in Culture," I was visualizing this rather prolonged initiating process, where rather than a quick dunk in a font, students are invited for a marathon swim. A voyage of discovery in the sea of Humanities.

Three years ago a small group of us who were stressing the humanities in our developmental courses in what we thought were exciting ways wanted to proceed more systematically and reach out to our colleagues. Since the fall of 1984 our College has provided three faculty coordinators with some released time each semester to develop thematic programs, invite speakers and performers to the College, to arrange off-campus trips, to locate related texts, and to write materials that make those texts accessible and useful for our explicit reading and writing goals. Among colleagues who value their autonomy highly--they decide the texts they will use, whether textbooks or primary sources--creating significant unified change is difficult. We have created a program, therefore, that depends on its success on the voluntary participation of teachers, who can follow our themes for a semester, or use one set of materials as they desire. At the beginning of the semester the faculty coordinators give all English teachers a schedule of educational/cultural events, and lead open discussions of our goals in choosing certain themes. During the semester we use a Teaching Center to disseminate newsletter articles and flyers advertising new materials, often brought in by a variety of teachers as well as the three coordinators. We have exhibits and displays of articles and books.

One measure of our success is the number of teachers who have chosen to bring classes to events that they have incorporated into their syllabi through reading and writing assignments, and class discussion. This semester 40 faculty have used the programs, 30 of them for more than one class, over a thousand different students have attended. Most are

in English classes but history, art, foreign language, and secretarial science students have also come. Over three years, ten faculty have acted as coordinators; their opportunity to develop material has been a valued method of staff development. (1)

In analyzing what we have done I have taken advantage of the furor now going on at my college over a general studies core curriculum. Faculty have been generating lists of goals for students and we have been discussing various schema for categorizing those goals. The published article on the "conflicting conceptions of the goals, content, and organization of curriculum" I have found most useful is that of Elliot W. Eisner and Elizabeth Vallance.(2) They start with learning processes, move through experiential activities, and end with content or knowledge. I would like to follow this general order.

The first cluster of curriculum goals has to do with learning to learn. Basic skills are part of this process, but we have acknowledged that students need to practice these skills on meaningful content. Indeed, research summarized by M. Celce-Murcia confirms that skills are best learned with "context-embedded practice, text based exercises, cognitively demanding activities, authentic materials and interesting and motivating content." (3) This conclusion may seem self-evident, but most textbooks on basic writing include drills on flowerpots, crocodiles and dust. Such drills are the ultimate expression of what Richard C. Richardson has characterized as the bitting syndrome where "most of the writing produced by students and much of what they read was present in discrete words and phrases." (4) We replace bits with whole texts

Along with with basic literacy skills, there are more sophisticated skills which stimulate independent thinking, what Eisner and Vallance call the development of cognitive processes. Such approaches value considering and evaluating alternate points of view, being alert to the exact choice of words, their connotations, the power of figurative language. We want students to question the underlying implications of texts rather than merely responding to surface meaning. To help teachers integrate these process goals of thinking, reading and writing, we create exercises which use the subject matter of the programs (context-embedded practice) and write sequences of discussion, short answer and essay questions to accompany texts.

Independent thinking also applies to the very process of learning standard English. We want our students to analyze this process and to be able to understand the "origins, nature, diversity, function and effects of language. (5) To achieve these ends we have encouraged the teachers of even the most remedial students to discuss the history of the English language. We encourage by providing handouts with Old, Middle and Shakespearean language side by side, and essays that discuss the role of conquerors (like William) in effecting language change and prestige. We also have invited colleagues to use their acting talent in Old and Middle English, students work on the etymology of irregular verbs with the ring of Beowulf in their ears We also have invited Willian Labov, the pre-eminent scholar on dialects and black English to discuss dialects with our developmental students. That semester we taught scenes from

Shaw's Pygmalian and showed the movie My Fair Lady. My students were divided on the question of whether Eliza Dolittle should marry Henry Higgins. Most were very indignant about Henry's attitude toward her speech and were impatient with her compliance.

The next cluster of goals revolve around experiential goals. Eisner and Vallance discuss "self-actualization and consummatory experiences" in this regard, a colleague refers simply to "an educational experience which is valuable in itself, whether or not a student continues." (6) One vehicle for this goal semester after semester has been for students to read plays, act out scenes, and go see professional performances. Words become alive and powerful; students often identify strongly with certain characters. We usually highlight one play a semester so there is plenty of time for background materials, and we choose plays, such as Graham Greene's Power and the Glory and The Diary of Anne Frank where historical context enriches the meaning of the play. When students attend, for the first time, a professional performance, their written reviews don't reflect audience passivity; they have actively participated in an event. Trips to museums also often produce keen interest; seeing a sphinx or a Monet painting seems intrinsically worthwhile, and students refer back to the occasion.

We try to tie experiential activities closely to skills involving reading and writing. Another project involves having our students read aloud to children. At three different times we have invited outstanding public

school teachers to come and talk about a variety of ways adults can interact with children to help them learn; then we have an assignment where each student reads to a child a number of times. The written report of this experience almost always reflects pride--both explicitly in what the student says and in the careful presentation of the paper. We recognize the affective goals of motivation and strong self-identity as growing organically from our pedagogical choices.

The final cluster of curriculum goals that Eisner and Vallance define involvescontent. When we choose our speakers, plays, books, and articles, we are primarily concerned about subject matter. We want themes that will involve the students for weeks at a time, not discrete random units illustrating, for example, cause and effect or comparison/contrast. An analysis of our programs and materials since 1984 reveals three major trends. The first is a bias in favor of Afro-American materials; the second involves classics in our Western European heritage, the third aims at knowing and valuing the diversity represented by third world cultures

The emphasis on Afro-American literature recognizes the fact that approximately 90% of our developmental students are black and also that themes in Afro-American history illuminate major trends in our total American experience. In developmental courses in general there is a trend to begin with material the students can identity with, and then to move to material further from their experience. We also are seeking role models for students. One such sequence of activities involved Charles Blockson, a

Temple University professor who had just published an article on the underground railroad in National Geographic. We prepared various questions on that article and exercises using the material. Then we invited Mr. Blockson to speak about his experiences researching and writing the article; he emphasized how he overcame, as a black, the negative attitudes of his teachers to Afro-American history. Next, classes went to Temple University where Mr. Blockson showed students his extensive collection of Afro-American literature. For most of the students this was the first visit to a campus where many Community College students transfer.
A few weeks later a singing group presented a program on the code songs of the underground railroad; they had quoted Mr. Blockson on their record album. We have in other semesters had other programs related to the abolitionist period Students have read Frederick Douglass's Narrative or a play about Douglass by Ossie Davis; a book about Harriet Tubman by Ann Petry who has come to Community; Thoreau on John Brown. We have brought a play about Sojourner Truth to our large auditorium as well as a movie on Lucretia Mott. Our colleagues debate the role of Afro-American literature in developmental education, but our programs on these themes consistently attract seven or eight classes, 150 students.

We choose works because of the richness of the conflicts and resolutions within them, but also because they are about well-known people, by well-known people, or because they help students form frameworks of historical or geographical knowledge. For developmental students particularly, their repertoire of background information often limits their ability to comprehend what they are reading; E.D. Hirsch has

highlighted the need for a common core of "extensive" knowledge in his articles on Cultural Literacy. (7) To discuss the phenomenon of becoming "well-known" we have had a folklorist from the University of Pennsylvania discuss the changing concept of heroes from Achilles to Luke Skywalker; we have provided material on a variety of Greek myths. I have had developmental students argue about Helen of Troy, Achilles and Odysseus, and while one student would have "given her red dancing shoes" to have been Helen, most judged all three fairly harshly after setting out their own criteria for hero or heroine. Students were also fairly skeptical about how Oedipus's problems applied to their own personal urges (even, or especially, after reading an essay by Freud), although the students did enjoy the gospel music of Oedipus at Colonus. We have read works by Dickens and Tennyson, Yeats, Auden and Arthur Miller. We have had extended units on evolution and dinosaurs, on World War II and the Holocaust.

A third major concern which emerges from an analysis of programs values the diversity of world cultures. This semester we have promoted examinations of Africa, Cambodia, and Maya Indians. A grant brought to C.C.P. Ali Mazrui, who put together the PBS series The Africans. Our program provided 300 students, developmental and in college credit courses, with materials written and edited by Mazrui, newspaper articles condemning and praising his series, and study materials to make the articles useful in a variety of English courses. Next, our Student Activities Office booked Dith Pran, the survivor of the killing fields of Cambodia, and our Cultural Series coodinators supplied newspaper articles on Dith Pran, an essay by a Cambodian student who also lived

through Pol Pot's regime, and arranged for a Cambodian student to talk with other students. Hostility between blacks and Asian refugees has been a problem in Philadelphia; attitudes seemed vastly changed after a few weeks of study. This semester my students wrote an essay defining the word "civilization" and discovered enough information about Maya Indians to form strong conflicting opinions about whether the Maya were "civilized." In the past three years we also have prepared extensive units on South Africa, Ethiopia, Vietnam and El Salvador. Our materials help students understand world events, but also to appreciate the cultures and develop a sense of social responsibility to others.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize how our goals for developmental students are integrated in our courses. Years ago students worked on writing skills in courses where their own essays were the primary text. Separate reading courses emphasized criticical analysis, yet textbooks with a variety of short unrelated essays were primarily used. Content courses were taught by different teachers of history, geography, psychology. In a first step toward integration, English teachers began to teach both reading and writing courses to the same students, and artificial barriers began to fall; we taught in clusters with the content teachers and could use their textbooks, if we wanted, as our reading text. Now we have decided we want significant content in our own classes with texts and themes we decide upon. We integrate goals of basic skills, independent thinking, greater knowledge and appreciation of the world in each class, ideally within each thematic unit. Our classroom discussions become educational experiences valuable in themselves, as well as preparation for further learning. Our Cultural Series allows teachers to grow by sharing materials, insights, problems and solutions. We challenge ourselves while we challenge our students.

Endnotes

1. Karen Bojar, who was the head of Project II our largest interdisciplinary developmental program, in 1984 initiated the Cultural Series program with three English teachers, Grace Flisser, Carol LaBelle and myself, and with a counselor, Ned Bachus who for two years helped us consciously to integrate skill, content, and affective goals. Partly by delivering papers at other conferences at Brooklyn College, the Delaware Valley Writing Council, and the National Conference of Developmental Studies, Karen, Grace, Carol and Ned have helped to form the ideas summarized in this paper.

In 1985-6 Karen Bojar acted as one coordinator of the series, emphasizing programs related to public education; Gerri Burd concentrated on attitudes toward language; Loraine Threadgill and Florence Freund, who work in our Learning Lab, developed material around South Africa and gospel music; Sherie Ernst emphasized Civil Rights; and Judy Engle focused on ideas of the hero. This semester the emphasis on humanities has been broadened by the addition of Gene Cook, an anthropologist who has led us to studies of dinosaurs, Maya, the greenhouse effect, and nuclear disarmament. The body of this paper draws upon the thinking and hard work of all ten of these faculty members.

I would also like to aknowledge the support of my College in funding a Teaching Center for the past two years, and the efforts of my colleagues, Irene Delpino and Larry MacKenzie in supporting with materials and workshops the activities of the Cultural Series.

2. Elliot W. Eisner and Elizabeth Vallance, "Five Conceptions of Curriculum: Their Roots and Implications for Curriculum Planning," Conflicting Conceptions of Curriculum. Berkeley, Ca.: McCitchon, 1974, pp. 1-18.

3. M. Celce-Murcia, "Making Informed Decisions about the Role of Grammar in Language Teaching," TESOL Newsletter, 19 (1985), p. . This article has been disseminated at our Teaching Center as part of faculty discussions about Patrick Hartwell's "Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammer," College English (Feb. 1985), pp. 105-127, which summarized research questioning whether any grammar drill improves writing.

4. Richard C. Richardson, Jr. Elizabeth C. Fisk and Morris A. Okun, Literacy in the Open-Access College (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1983), p. 70.

5. Pairat Sethbhakdi, in-house memo related to General Studies, Fall 1986.

5 Alison Tasch, "Suggestions for a General Studies Curriculum," in-house, Fall 1986. Alison has been the head of Project II during the entire time of the Cultural Series, and her support, both in reading Old English to students and attending weekly meetings, has been essential.

6. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. "Cultural Literacy and the Schools," American Educator, (Summer 1985), pp. 8-15. In November 1986 Karen Bojar, Grace Flisser and I traveled to Virginia to consult with E.D. Hirsch as part of a development grant from N.E.H.

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